

THE NEW ARCHDIOCESE: ONE-HALF OF ALBERTA

Climb aboard a 600 mile-an-hour jetliner and swish along the borders of the Grouard-McLennan archdiocese. About three hours later you will arrive at your starting point.

The trip would give you some idea of the immense area (180,000 square miles) which Archbishop Henri Routhier, OMI, has in his care.

It's half of the area of the province of Alberta, with a scattered population of 36,000 native and white Roman Catholics in a total population of about 100,000 people.

Pope Paul recently raised the vicariate to the status of an archdiocese in a general re-organization throughout Northern Canada.

Grouped with Grouard-McLennan are the dioceses of Mackenzie-Fort Smith, Prince George and Whitehorse.

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In Nearly a quarter of a century since Archbishop Routhier first went north as the provincial of the Oblates, the Peace River area has made the great leap from the horse and buggy to the jet age.

A new railway, paved highways, air service, oil and other natural resources discoveries constantly change the pattern of life for him and his 80 priests and 20 brothers, most of whom are Oblates.

Archbishop Routhier was consecrated in 1945 and assumed the leadership of the territory in 1946.

The Second World War was rapidly ending and Peace River people were wondering whether their boys overseas could ever be happy down on the farms, ravaged by depression and years of hardship.

Those were the days when Archbishop Routhier traveled through his vicariate by genuine horse-power and an old car. There were no plush motels to receive the weary traveler, only deserted shacks in which they found refuge from the wind.

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As the archbishop, who is a native Albertan (born in Pincher Creek) and as Canadian as maple syrup (his grandfather wrote the French version of O Canada), looks back to the early days, the advances made in education stand out most in his mind.

There were about 2,200 students in the vicariate's schools in 1944. Today, that number has risen to 8,436 Catholics and 1,113 students of other denominations.

Ten new separate schools and ten Catholic public schools have been opened in that time.

The vicariate operated five boarding schools for Indian children, two closed, but a new one was opened at Hay Lakes.

There were five boarding schools for white children in operation; dormitories were built at six other centres during the years that followed.

School centralization closed down many of the dormitories, but Archbishop Routhier believes they gave the children a much better standard of education than was possible in the one-room schools.

In 1951, the Oblates built a boys' college, « Our Lady of Peace », in Falher. Now, its students attend the local high school but live at the college, where they receive an enriched program of activities.

Archbishop Routhier and his people have been able to overcome the disadvantages of distance and small numbers to provide a religious education for 85 per cent of the children in the archdiocese.

In three schools, where Catholic students are a minority, public school boards have Sisters on the

teaching staff. Other schools make religious education available.

The three congregations of sisters in the vicariate in 1944 have been joined by nine other groups of mainly teaching and nursing sisters living in 42 convents throughout the area.

Lay groups have grown rapidly: the Catholic Women's League which had three councils, now has 26; the Knights of Columbus which had no councils; now is organized in seven centres.

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The Vicariate of Athabasca-Mackenzie was erected in 1862, with Bishop Henri Farand as the first vicar apostolic.

He was succeeded by Bishop Emile Grouard, a man with a long beard and many talents. He was in charge for almost 40 years and retired in 1929, well over the age of 90.

In the next 18 years, there were two bishops before the appointment of Archbishop Routhier to the post.

Today, he faces the problems of a population that is shifting to towns and cities, where the simple life of the past is traded for the complexities of industrialized society.

Archbishop Routhier is constantly on the move, attempting to know his priests and people better and to gain a greater understanding of their problems in the 91 parishes.

The warm friendship and concern of this soft-spoken man is evident in the comment of one of his priests, «Some people you like to see go away. We always like to see him come home.

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